

BUILDING THE VISION

A Series of AZTech ITS Model Deployment Success Stories for the Phoenix Metropolitan Area

NUMBER SIX

User Friendliness Touches Arizona

Kiosks Offer Fast, Efficient Resource for Traveler and Community Information

The Challenge:

To the traveling public, the most readily apparent benefit of AZTech is easy access to traveler information. Providing travelers with real value requires that information to be factual, comprehensive and timely.

Through AZTech, numerous services are being developed to furnish travelers with fast, accurate information. One feature in particular was designed to put information quite literally at the fingertips of travelers. The AZTech blueprint called for the development of kiosks that would offer up traveler and community information at the touch of a button.

As AZTech began to research the project, however, it found that scarce enthusiasm existed for the kiosk as an informational tool. The traditional kiosk, it seemed, had failed to win much favor with the public. The general perception of kiosks was that they were often unreasonably slow, and many people weren't willing to endure the long waits often required to use them. There were also design flaws that made many kiosks difficult to use, compounded by operational flaws that made them expensive to maintain. And inefficiency in updating meant that any information the kiosk was able to provide would most likely be outdated. Although the development of Internet-based kiosks addressed some of these shortcomings, they also presented the inconvenience of slow or broken connections and sluggish download times.

To fulfill its goal of furnishing kiosks that could deliver real value to travelers, AZTech set its sights well beyond the traditional kiosk. The development of a kiosk that was truly user friendly became AZTech's objective.

The Solution:

Identifying a private partner that could help AZTech build a better kiosk was an important first step. Through an open competitive bid process, AZTech selected Ecotek, a technology firm experienced in developing kiosks for traveler and tourism purposes. The company wasted no time in getting the project on track. By using proven off-the-shelf software, an operational prototype was built within two weeks. Working closely with AZTech, a system was developed that delivers on the kiosk's promise as a useful informational tool.

The AZTech kiosk employs a hybrid system that offers the best of both worlds. Quick-access information is available through "local" information located on the kiosk's hard drive, and real-time information can be accessed through an Internet connection. The combination technology provides the foundation for a huge reserve of data. And each kiosk is programmed to automatically update the local information stored on its hard drive each night via the Internet.

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"Ecotek supplied the kiosk, the cabinetry, the hardware and the kiosk engine, which is the technology that retrieves the information that people want displayed," said John Reimers, Ecotek project manager. "Finally, we developed the screens, the displays and the content that you see." The kiosks come in three varieties: an indoor model, an outdoor model specially designed for the Arizona climate, and a small tabletop model. Initially, 30 kiosks were put in place, with plans calling for a total of 60 to be up and running by the end of the year. Locations include various public buildings, transit centers, shopping malls and airport terminals in the Phoenix metropolitan area. They also will be installed at truck stops and tourist information centers along Interstate 40 in Northern Arizona.

Each public agency participating in the AZTech project was given one kiosk free of charge. Additional kiosks are available to public partners at a 50 percent subsidy, and to private partners at a 25 percent subsidy. All partners are responsible for the routine servicing and maintenance of their kiosks, with AZTech assuming responsibility for the software maintenance.

The Benefits:

By using an AZTech kiosk, virtually any one can access a wealth of traveler and community information quickly and efficiently - absolutely free of charge. The user-friendly systems are easily operated. By touching on-screen icons, users can navigate throughout the system to various sites.

For travelers, the kiosks offer reports on highway conditions and closures statewide including prevailing freeway speeds, incident reports and video; interactive trip-planning maps; weather reports; transit data including bus routes and schedules; applications for Dial-a-Ride and ride-sharing programs; and the Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport home page with downloadable flight schedules and airport maps. Users also can access an assortment of tourism information, including the City of Phoenix and Maricopa County home pages, the National Parks Services home page and local cities' event calendars. In addition, the kiosk's laser printer can provide hard copies of the onscreen information. "Basically, the kiosks are an extension of everything we have at the Traffic Operations Center, giving motorists a wide range of traffic data," said Joe Spadafino, AZTech kiosk project coordinator. "They're geared toward getting good information out to the motoring public in general, but they also promote tourism."

New features are being phased in as they become available. Upcoming features include real-time traffic data, real-time video of freeways and surface streets, automatic bus locators for certain routes and real-time flight information.

The Internet access and nightly updates to local data ensure that all information is timely. And since each kiosk updates itself automatically, ongoing maintenance costs are minimal.

As an international showcase for state-of-the-art Intelligent Transportation Systems, the AZTech Model Deployment Initiative has documented numerous success stories. To learn more, visit the AZTech home page on the Internet at <http://www.azfms.com>.